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Faith, Politics, and Me

Through the years 1789 and 1793 I was the most terrified that I’d ever been in my entire life. I could not bear to see this happen, and yet I stayed when I should have fled. Looking out what little I had of an office window, I could see the people walking by on the streets, my hands poised ready on the paper. My right hand twitched, still holding the pencil. It wanted to write, but about what?

At that moment, it hit me. Only a few months after what they call La Revolution Française, the French Revolution, I decided to write a reflection of my experiences. My local newspaper, *La Voix*, the voice, was intended to be the voice of the middle class. But this time the article would be sharing my voice, and the horror I felt at La Revolution Française.

I began to write, and as I did, facing many of my memories for the first time, I started to cry. As I recalled memories of my sister, and my own near death experience, I became aware of the darkness outside. I rose and walked across the room and when I returned, I had a match poised in one hand, the other hovering around it, protecting it from the ominous wind.

I felt like that flame during La Revolution Française. I had needed protection, but somehow I knew it would not come. Everyone had it out for les riches, the rich, and I felt alone in my decision not to be a part of that. My family had made the decision to stand apart, and initially was ignored, because they did not oppose those who ‘oppressed us’. What they did not understand is that there is always a cost in revolution, and we would pay that cost in the end.

The trees on the right side of the building scrapped the side as if alive, and I was startled by the sudden noise that interrupted my thoughts. I sat back down, lit the candle, and began to write. I wrote my story, the story of the 4 years that would change my life forever.

To begin a story you have to know the facts, or at least that’s what I learned in the little schooling I had from my mother. La Revolution started over money, as everything has always been about the money. At the time, the government was paying back a huge debt, including the interest that came with the debt. Even 6 years later the French people were still paying the price for helping the Americans fight our perennial foe, the English. Our money was providing resources they did not have. Frankly, we did not have enough resources for ourselves at the time. The debt was growing faster than we could pay, and the government’s only reaction was to tax the people to excess.

This was where all the trouble began, and as I listened to neighbors and friends talk about their plans, I couldn’t believe my ears. There were roughly 25 million people in France, and many of them were mad. I remember a conversation I once had with a neighbor when my ma sent me to go ask for some carrots for her soup.

“Bonjour Monsieur Focet! How are you today?” I began.

“Not too well Emmanuel for, you see, I have been thinking a lot about our brothers’ plans. They believe that rising up against the nobility is the best thing for our country.” Monsieur Focet explained. I looked at him, stunned, as such a thing had never occurred to me as a possibility, or what it would mean for our livelihoods.

“But Monsieur, would this be a wise thing?”

“Why not? Les riches and their leader, our intolerable King Louis himself, are killing us with their taxes! Not only that, you may be sure, my boy, les riches do not pay these crushing taxes. Oh no, we are the only ones who are paying for les riches grand lives and for the American’s war! I’m not so sure I disagree with their plans.” As he finished his thought, he looked around as if someone was watching him, and quickly went inside his house and shut the door. His abrupt retreat was surprising as Monsieur Focet had never left me in such a manner. Looking around myself, I hurried back home to my family.

My family was a very tightly knit group. I had a brother, Joseph, and a sister, Clarice, and my mother and father. My brother and sister, twins, were only 10, but very astute for such a young age, and my mother and father were proud of all three of us. As I grabbed the door handle, I guessed at what they would all be doing. My brother and sister would be sitting in front of the fire place, each playing with a little wooden toy I had made for them. My mother would be at the stove watching the soup for which I was bringing Monsieur Focet’s carrots, and my father would be sitting at the kitchen table reading a book. Occasionally my dad showed me support by reading my articles in the newsletter, but making few comments. He would just sit and read, and I knew that he was proud of me despite his lack of verbal praise.

As I walked through the doorway, my brother and sister jumped up to greet me.

“Emmanuel! Emmanuel! Look we’re playing with the toys you gave us,” as they smiled up at me with little rays of sunshine, “Will you play with us? Please Emmanuel? Please?”

“Ok, but wait just a minute.” I smiled back at them.

“Ok!” Clarice and Joseph ran back to sit in front of the fireplace and waited for me as I crossed the room to talk to my parents about Monsieur Focet’s statement and his unusual behavior.

As I relayed the events that had occurred, their faces grew darker and more concerned. We were all afraid of the same thing. King Louis XIV running for his life with nearly all of France chasing him. We were frightened about what this would mean for us. We knew two things; the government was crushing the French people with taxes, and we didn’t want trouble for our family.

My family and I watched as anger enveloped more and more of our friends and neighbors. Eventually this angry group would rise up in revolution. It began with the storming of the Bastille, the infamous French prison. July 14, 1789 was the day they stormed the Bastille, and my family and I saw them coming from a mile away.

The village appeared to be consumed by fire, an illusion created by the torches carried by the enraged mob. The sky was covered in thick, black clouds, made even more ominous by the orange fury in the angry men’s eyes. They marched, yelling and screaming for blood and revenge. My family and I were completely unprepared for what came next.

We were afraid that they would go after houses and other things, burning them down, but we were wrong. They started to run when they reached the outskirts of the city. We had been standing outside while Joseph got his toys from inside, and we were screaming at him to hurry because they were coming. As the mob rushed past, my parents prevented Joseph from being taken with the crowd, but Clarice and I were not so fortunate.

From that point forward things were a blur, and all I can remember is the rush, the noise, and a loud thumping in my ears that only could have been the sound my heart beating. It was the sound of my fear. Eventually, I turned to run with the crowd as I tried to avoid being trampled. As the screaming continued around me, I thought of my family. Surely if I had been so easily swept along by the mob, they could have been as well.

The run became easier as I stopped thinking about my family and began concentrating on what the mob was planning. We reached the Bastille and I saw a monster. Accented by the flames from the torches, the Bastille looked like a fortress as, in fact, it was as the guards had locked it from the inside. However, even a prison guard should know that a lock meant to hold a door shut against its inhabitants was no match for outraged mob. They stormed the door, hitting it and attempting to light it on fire.

The Governor of the Prison apparently told his guards to charge the mob because he did not know what else to do. This only escalated the situation. The prison guards opened fire on us. As the gun shots erupted, so did the crowd. They became angrier and angrier, and many were falling on either side of me, as I ducked and tried to keep my head from becoming a target of the guards’ weapons. A man fell beside me. I looked to find, in horror, that it was our friend Monsieur Focet. I can still see the small hole in his chest from which his life poured. I wretched, said a prayer for his soul, and crawled away in fear and despair.

The guards eventually fell and the mob swept into the Bastille looking for the Governor of the Prison. When they found him, he tried to plead for mercy, but they would not have it and chopped off his head. I know because I was in the room when it happened. I had been swept along by the crowd in their search for the Governor. Distracted by all the French men and women dying around me, I had momentarily stopped thinking about my family. The crowd placed the Governor’s head on a pike, and was heading out to display their grisly trophy to the nobility, as if to say they would be next. I came to my senses and began searching for my family hurrying out of the giant doors of the Bastille. As I felt the air outside, warm and unwelcoming, almost palpable with the mob’s hatred, I discovered my sister.

Clarice had been swept away in the crowd, but had not been as lucky as I. One of the guard’s shots had found its home in her chest. I cradled her in my arms and wept, like so many others around me for she died, there outside the Bastille, the night La Revolution Française began.

I carried Clarice home and found my parents worried sick about what had happened to us. When I first walked up they were overjoyed to see me alive and well, but seeing Clarice’s limp body in my arms, howled in anguish at the death of their beautiful, innocent child.

Joseph did not understand what had happened and tried to wake her up. “Clarice? Clarice! Come on Clarice I saved our toys. Let’s go play!” he said. We could not bring ourselves to tell him what happened to her, and eventually we would not have to.

That night 98 died from the gun fire, including our innocent Clarice, and La Revolution Française only became worse as it progressed. Many noble men and women were executed, along with the guilty, their only crime being an accident of birth. Paysans screamed for a constitution, which only exacerbated the feuding. Anyone thought to oppose the revolution, or sympathize with the nobles, and hunted down and exiled or killed.

King Louis XIV was chased out of his own palace, and the parliament voted to revoke his powers as king on that very day. King Louis was now a prisoner of the people of France who were determined to be a republic even, potentially, at the cost of destroying of our society and our relationships with our neighboring countries. Foreign powers began to threaten France if the peopled did anything to harm King Louis, which only offended the conspirators and angry citizens. On January 20, 1793 King Louis was executed by the guillotine, which eventually drank the blood of so many French men and women.

Today is June 13, 1793, and the situation hasn’t gotten much better. France is now at war with and we are quickly running out of resources. My family and I think they will soon pass another constitution, but whether it will work remains a question. For my country’s sake, I hope and pray that this conflict is resolved soon. Otherwise, I fear France will not survive.

I put my pen down on the paper which I would send out with the delivery boy in the morning, and stared out the window. The clouds were black and thick, and I began to see tinges of orange as if I were back at the Bastille. I began to weep.

Epilogue

September 5th began what many would call ‘the reign of terror’. The new French government did pass a new republican constitution, but caused as much harm as good. France’s troubles increased and more and more people became angry. In August, the ‘Committee of Public Safety’, determined to wipe out all counter-revolutionaries, continue to increase the size of its army, supplying food to revolutionaries, while allowing the citizenry to starve. There was finally a peak and in October, seventy-three deputies considered not to be revolutionary enough, were tried, convicted, and killed by the guillotine. From this point forward, many were arrested as traitors, tried in groups, and guillotined. On October 16, Marie Antoinette was also guillotined after long periods of running away from her own people. Emmanuel was among them for writing and publishing his article in *La Voix*. He was tried, along with his family, and along with 177 other innocent people between October and December 1793, victims of the French Revolution that began with the storming of the Bastille.

Attribution of Research

1. *A History of Western Society since 1300*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Print.
   * Occurred between 1789 and 1791
   * Began in the financial difficulties of the government due to Louis the XIV's lack of guidance
   * By the 1780's 50% of France's annual budget went for ever-increasing interest payments on the ever-increasing debt
   * Another 25% went to maintain the military
   * 6% was absorbed by the costly living style of the king and his court in Versailles
   * In the 1780's the French debt was held by aristocratic and bourgeois creditors.
2. Lloyd, Moote A. "Louis XIV, King of France." 1-2. *Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <http://gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0176900-0>.
   * The French Monarchy at that point had become too weak, so declaring partial bankruptcy would not work out
   * France had 25 million inhabitants and they were divided into three orders (or estates), the clergy, the nobility, and everyone else
   * The nobles were taxed very lightly, so theoretically there wasn't even a tax
   * Nobles also enjoyed manorial rights, which stated that they could even tax the peasantry for their own profit
   * Nobles also had honorific privileges, such as the right to precedence on public occassions and the right to wear a sword
   * Everyone else was considered the middle class
3. Smitha, Frank E. "Political Reform and Fall of the Bastille." *MacroHistory : World History*. 2009. Web. 18 Mar. 2010. <http://www.fsmitha.com/h3/h33-fr2.htm>.
   * A crowd of 80,000 stormed the Bastille looking for weapons on July 14, 1789.
   * When the new government proposed a constitution they asked Louis XIV about what he would prefer to do, but when he gave his opinions newspapers jumped on it saying that Louis was in opposition and only made things worse.
   * Eventually a constitution was formed, but then Frenchman and women were who were considered against the revolution needed to be taken care of.
   * Louis was declared insufficiently in favor of the revolution, and foreign support threatened the national assembly
     1. Eventually they threatened Louis and his power was revoked and a new constitution redrawn. France was now to be a republic
   * After the execution in 1793 about 4 years later it would be chaos, more shortages of resources, and less food.
   * King Louis’s loyalty was questioned and he was executed on January 20, 1793.
   * As the revolution continued the people became more and more out of control
     1. A new constitution was passed but not upheld for very long
     2. Soon Frenchman were looking for traitors
     3. Between October and December 1793, 177 people were killed along with Marie Antoinette.
4. *World Book Advanced Encyclopedia*. World Book, 2010. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <http://www.worldbookonline.com/advanced/printarticle?id=ar211160&st=the+french+revolution>.
   * Many commoners were urban artists or day laborers, and the vast majority were peasants and agricultural workers
   * The only reason they were all put into one category was because they weren't nobility or clergy so they had no other social status to be in
   * The middle class grew rapidly in the eighteenth century, tripling to about 2.3 million persons or about 8 percent of France's population
   * As a result of the population growing the French bourgeoisie eventually rose up to lead the entire third estate in a great social revolution
   * This revolution destroyed feudal priveleges and established a capitalist order based on individualism and a market economy
5. Zeldin, Theodore. *France, 1848-1945: Ambition, Love and Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1973. Print.
   * In 1789 150,000 people out of the city's 600,000 people were without work
   * This led to the decision after the economic hardships to enter the revolutionary stage
   * Rumors about the king's armies invading the city began to form, and then on July 14 the middle class marched to bastille to look for weapons
   * when the stormed bastille, that was commonly used for a prison, the governor of the fortress prison didn't know what to do and told his men to fire, killing 98 people
   * Eventually they stormed bastille and the governor was murdered and his head stuck on a pike
   * Peasants attacked any kind of nobility or wealthy upper middle class and got rid of their obligations, returned their own land, and did not pay taxes
6. "Timeline of the French Revolution -." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 18 Mar. 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\_of\_the\_French\_Revolution>.
   * September 5: Start of Reign of Terror.
   * October 16: Marie Antoinette guillotined.

Works Cited

1. *A History of Western Society since 1300*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Print.
2. Lloyd, Moote A. "Louis XIV, King of France." 1-2. *Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia*. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <http://gme.grolier.com/article?assetid=0176900-0>.
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4. "Timeline of the French Revolution -." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 18 Mar. 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\_of\_the\_French\_Revolution>.
5. *World Book Advanced Encyclopedia*. World Book, 2010. Web. 2 Mar. 2010. <http://www.worldbookonline.com/advanced/printarticle?id=ar211160&st=the+french+revolution>.
6. Zeldin, Theodore. *France, 1848-1945: Ambition, Love and Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1973. Print.